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ABSTRACT

The teaching of inquiry paradigms that supplement traditional rational and empirical approaches is advocated in psychology training settings. This program proposal introduces hermeneutics, an inquiry paradigm focusing on the interpretation of meanings inherent in human action, into the curricula of psychology programs. Two curricula offerings are proposed: (1) research methods classes that teach hermeneutics using a comparative model; (2) small group seminars that apply hermeneutic methods to self-knowledge development. Hermeneutics focuses on the discovery of meaning inherent in human activity, and is appropriate to the study of human action. The end product of hermeneutic inquiry is an interpretive account, as opposed to a formal set of rules (rationalism) or a causal law (empiricism). Its ability to capture the subtle, complex, and contextual qualities that are unique to human action and experience are seen as especially valuable for students in clinical training. Intended as a contribution to the knowledge base from which educational programs in psychology are developed, this proposal provides an overview and a diagram of the hermeneutics inquiry process. (EMK)

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Teaching Activity Poster

PRACTICAL HERMENEUTIC TEACHING:

RESEARCH METHODS AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The teaching of inquiry paradigms that supplement traditional rational and empirical approaches has been advocated in psychology training settings. This program proposal introduces hermeneutics, an inquiry paradigm focusing on the interpretation of meanings inherent in human action, into the curricula of psychology programs. Two curricula offerings are proposed: 1) research methods classes that teach hermeneutics using a comparative model, and 2) small group seminars that apply hermeneutic methods to self-knowledge development. The compatibility of hermeneutics with subjective and contextual aspects of human nature is discussed. This proposal is intended as a contribution to the knowledge base from which educational programs in psychology can be developed.

Summary

This program proposal is presented as part of the growing body of literature on the use of alternate inquiry paradigms in the human sciences. In 1991, the National Council of Schools of Professional Psychology formally acknowledged the validity of multiple ways of knowing, including both objective knowledge derived from empirical investigation, and subjective knowledge based on personal experience (McHolland, 1991). Additionally, the Council recommended that psychology programs include in their curricula "the education of the self, (which) should be at the very center of the core curriculum in professional psychology, providing its backbone." (Singer, Peterson, & Magidson, 1991). These endorsements reflect a recent trend toward broadening the knowledge base within psychology training (McConnell, 1984; Kanfer, 1990).

This program proposal presents a model for the inclusion of hermeneutics, a human science inquiry paradigm, in two areas of the teaching of psychology: 1) research methods classes at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and 2) small group psychotherapy seminars at the graduate level. Hermeneutics focuses on the discovery

of meaning inherent in human activity, and has been referred to as the method of investigation most appropriate to the study of human action (Packer, 1985). The ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of hermeneutics are compatible with the nature of human experience, which includes subjective, objective, personal, universal, and process-oriented aspects. Hermeneutics is presented as one of several research methodologies used to uncover knowledge about human nature. Students are also encouraged to apply the hermeneutic method to their own personal and subjective experiences as developing therapists. Knowledge derived in this fashion can be used in an informed and deliberate way to assist in the treatment of clients. Self-knowledge obtained via the hermeneutic method can supplement other forms of knowledge obtained via other methodologies.

Part I - Introduction of the Hermeneutic Model - Research Methods Class

Within the past 25 years, a number of human science inquiry paradigms have been proposed as supplements to traditional empirical and rational methods of inquiry. These include existential/phenomenological approaches, cybernetic approaches, naturalistic-ethnographic approaches, social constructionism, historicism, critical theory, heuristic inquiry, and hermeneutics (Berman, 1986; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Faulconer & Williams, 1985; Guba, 1990; Hoshmand, 1989; Lazarus, 1993; Packer, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1983). A common assumption of these approaches is that the realm of human science is value-laden, that what observers take to be true depends upon the framework of knowledge and assumptions they bring with them (Phillips,

1990). Another common assumption is that human action is fundamentally different from the rest of the changes that occur in nature, largely due to its cultural, contextual, and linguistic embeddedness. Therefore, human action requires a type of explanation that differs from the traditional deductive-nomological and the causal kinds (Polkinghorne, 1983). Hermeneutics represents a method of inquiry that allows for subjective and contextual realities of human experience.

Packer (1985) has compared rationalism, empiricism, and hermeneutics in three areas: 1) the origin of knowledge, 2) the nature of the object of study, and 3) the type of explanation. This program proposes a method of teaching hermeneutics using Packer's comparative system, as outlined below:

*** *** *** ***	***Rationalism*** ***	***Empiricism*** ***	***Hermeneutics***
1) Origin of Knowledge	theorizing	data	activity
2) Nature of Object of Study	abstract system of relations	mechanical system of forces	semantic structure of activity
3) Type of Explanation	formal characterizations	causal laws	interpretation

Part II - Application of the Hermeneutic Approach - Small Group Seminars

Recent scholarly efforts have applied hermeneutic methods to the study of social and moral development and to the study of social interaction (Packer, 1991, 1992). These studies have focused on the interpersonal activities of children and adolescents. Communication between a client and a student learning to do therapy represents another type of social interaction to which hermeneutic methods can be applied, and from which interpretive accounts can be drawn.

In this section we propose the application of hermeneutic methods in small group seminars to the exploration of students' interactions with their clients. Self-knowledge is uncovered through dialogue with other students that elucidates the values and underlying meanings inherent in the communication of a student with his or her client. For example, a student may note that he or she becomes uncomfortable when a client expresses anger. The student may not know what the discomfort means at the time, but brings it to the seminar for discussion. Through dialogue with other seminar members, the student can compare and contrast experiences, respecting the subjectivity, individuality, and contextual embeddedness of each student's experience.

The end product of hermeneutic inquiry in this setting is an interpretive account, as opposed to a formal set of rules (rationalism) or a causal law (empiricism). While the interpretive account lacks predictive and objective value that other forms of inquiry

can provide, it is valuable in its capacity to capture the subtle, complex, and contextual qualities that are unique to human action and experience--particularly human interaction that occurs in therapy. Furthermore, the final interpretive account guides the student toward areas of focus for further clinical training.

The model below illustrates a sample application of hermeneutic inquiry in the small group seminar format:

***	***	***Hermeneutics***	***	***Sample Application***
1) Origin of Knowledge		activity		feeling uncomfortable
2) Nature of Object of Study		semantic structure of activity		meaning of discomfort: countertransference? client's defenses? diffs. in personality or communication styles? Contextual/historical/value/ cultural differences between student and client?
3) Type of Explanation		interpretation		countertransference
4) Application of knowledge		training		readings and supervision on countertransference issues

Conclusion

Reflecting postmodern attitudes about the acquisition and application of psychological knowledge, this proposal presents a model for the teaching of hermeneutics in both undergraduate and graduate level psychology curricula. In research methods classes, a comparative model is recommended, which outlines the ontological, epistemological,

and methodological assumptions of hermeneutics and other research paradigms. In small group seminars, hermeneutic inquiry can be applied to the development of self-knowledge in students training to do psychotherapy. Hermeneutics is proposed to supplement, rather than replace traditional rational and empirical methods of knowledge acquisition.

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